

First Day Ceremony

How can the U.S. Postal Service honor both Mary Lasker and Marge Simpson in the same month? I think we can all agree that these are two very different specimens of American womanhood!

Mary Lasker: Philanthropist, Chairman of a Foundation to promote medical science, founder of the Lasker Awards for Medical Research, and tireless worker for government funding for research to prolong life and prevent disease.

Marge Simpson: a cartoon mom in what purports to be a TV comedy. Her profoundest statements place her, frankly, in the Dingbat category. For instance, she says of History that it "is like an amusement park, Except instead of rides you have dates to memorize."

Both stamps came out of the same group: The Postmaster General's Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee. CSAC, as it is known, was created in 1957, as a means of getting Congress out of the business of mandating stamp subjects.

It has up to 15 members, representing a wide variety of experience. For example our Chairman, Jean Picker Firstenberg, is former Chief Operating Officer of the American Film Institute.

Michael Heyman, former Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, is a member

Another is Donna DeVarona, an Olympic swimming gold medalist

Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is a member. In addition to producing several PBS specials, most recently on the life of Abraham Lincoln, he is Director of the WEB DuBois Institute for African-American Research at Harvard.

I've been a member of CSAC since 1998, representing the stamp collecting community, and as the one on the Committee with expertise in US international relations.

The Committee is charged with developing a yearly program that reflects the best of America.

And here is where push comes to shove. In coming up with that program, there are several imperatives:

We need to include serious subjects - people and events from our past that helped to form us as a nation and a people.

We need to recognize the ethnic and racial diversity that are part and parcel of the America we know today, and the struggles for equality that minorities have endured.

We need to include American icons in the arts, sports, sciences, entertainment, and more.

We need to include significant statehood, and historical event anniversaries

We need to include the flora and fauna that make for the attractive stamps that the general public asks for.

And we need to balance all these elements to make certain that each year's program has just the right amount of history versus pop culture, people versus events; that it does not overemphasize any one segment of the population, be it sports figures, a specific minority, scientists, or revolutionary war heroes.

And we need to do this with one eye on the fact that what we issue has to resonate with the American consciousness, or no one will buy or collect our stamps.

So here is the answer to the question I posed at the start: Mary Lasker is serious history; the kind of person who is not part of the American consciousness for long after her consequential life ended. But her accomplishments deserve to be recognized.

Marge Simpson and her family, like it or not – and I have to admit I am not a fan - are an American creation, critically acclaimed, now appealing to a second generation of Americans, and known worldwide. She resonates with Americans, and will help stamp collecting remain strong.

And in a very real sense, Marge's popularity will encourage the American public to look at the rest of the stamps issued by the Postal Service, and to learn about and appreciate Mary Lasker.